



Democracy Round-Table 2008
Opening statement
by Vidar Helgesen, Secretary General of International IDEA
Delhi, 17 June 2008

Honourable Minister of State Jairam Ramesh of India,
Honourable Minister Osei Adjei of Ghana,
Honourable Minister Marco Hausiku of Namibia,
Honourable Members of Parliament,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Professors, Researchers and Civil society leaders,
Dear guests and friends,

I wish to thank you all for being with us today. My special thanks are extended to the Government of India for its warm hospitality and to the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies - CSDS - for its dedicated partnership in the organisation of this Round Table.

There is, of course, a formal reason behind our choice of Delhi as the venue of this event: India currently holds the chair of International IDEA's Council of member states. However, beyond and above this formal reason, one could hardly think of a more appropriate place to further and deepen the debate on democracy and development. We are in the largest democracy in the world and we are also in a country that, in the six decades of its independence, has become one of the most dynamic and vibrant economies, a truly global one.

India's researchers in social, economic and political sciences are breaking new ground and founding new schools of thought at many universities in India and all over the world. The very idea of human development has its cradle on the subcontinent: an idea that has already produced a major impact on the way we perceive some global issues and envision their possible solutions.

At the same time, India's infinitely diverse reality continues posing new challenges, including those stemming from a long legacy of deep rooted poverty and social inequality. Nowhere as much as in India, are democracy and development so closely intertwined: while clearly valued for their own sake, they also cross paths at every step of the road.

International IDEA views democracy as a system of governance in which there is popular control over public decision-making and decision-makers, and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control. IDEA strives to create, compile and share knowledge for democracy-building, to influence policy and to improve democracy-building processes at the national level and in international forums. We also support democratic reform processes and initiatives when requested by a specific country

Our own work in support of democracy has provided us with ample evidence that institutions can rapidly lose popular trust and support, particularly when monopolised by self-complacent elites and isolated from social realities. Wherever democracy is in the making today - from Bolivia to Nepal, from Egypt to Morocco - those who invest in it their hopes and their political commitment, see in it much more than elections, more than a system of well designed institutions, more than a state that refrains from interfering in individual freedoms: they aspire to a safer, freer, more dignified and more rewarding life.

There is much talk today of democracy in crisis, or in recession. As witnessed in several countries across the globe in recent months, the problem today is not the lack of popular support for the idea of democracy, but the way in which some vital institutions of democracy are functioning: elections are being "stolen", political parties are often perceived as top-heavy, corrupt, male-dominated and ineffective, parliaments as powerless and complacent, failing to exercise their oversight role.

The major challenge for democracy is to deliver on its promises and to generate inclusion, more equitable development and a better quality of life for the population at large.

In too many places around the world, poverty and exclusion – the exclusion of women, indigenous and migrant populations in particular - are preventing people from exercising their political rights. Though Africa is the region hardest hit by poverty, the rest of the world is far from being spared: deep social inequalities persist in Latin America and Asia in spite of high (in the case of Asia – historically unique) growth rates. Even Europe and North America, as the most economically developed regions of the world, are not exempt from pockets of poverty and exclusion.

By stepping-up their commitments to reduce poverty, promote inclusiveness, enhance women's political participation and implement in their totality the Millennium Development Goals, governments from the North and from the South as well as international and regional organisations, will make a most important contribution to democracy. This is not to say, however, that democracy will flow from economic development alone.

Democracy-building is by no means an area allowing for the drawing of divides between “donors” and “receivers”. No country can “donate” democracy and no country can receive it from abroad. The idea that the West (or the North) should coach the South into democracy is one of those harmful colonial paradigms to be un-learned - the sooner the better.

Rich pools of historical experience and knowledge, best practices and lessons learned exist in all parts of the world. Untapped resources for shared democracy building are waiting to be mobilised through South-South cooperation. There is much to be learned from non-Western and customary experiences of dialogue, reconciliation and consensus-building, and about their possible synergies with more formal mechanisms.

In the field of development too, the landscape is changing: new emerging economies are entering the stage, thus broadening, for those in need of experience and support, the range of options to choose from and to combine in accordance with their own needs and priorities.

But development too is one of those ideas that require a deeper insight. Who is shaping it and for whom? Do ordinary people have a say? Can they rely on their elected representatives to set the right priorities? Modern economies have become highly complex mechanisms and the same can be said about development cooperation agreements. Neither stock exchange figures nor “poverty reduction strategy papers” – PRSPs - are easy reading for the non-initiated.

What is the real meaning of “national ownership” in these circumstances? Highly valued as one of the guiding principles of international development cooperation, “national ownership”, gets often reduced, for all practical purposes, to ownership by the executive branch of government. This is the case in both developed and developing countries.

Ownership of development needs to be “democratized”. For this to happen, “those who do democracy” - political parties, legislators, as well as civil society and the media – need to assume a key role in the debating and shaping of development strategies and agendas.

Likewise, those who “do development”, whether national planning agencies or development assistance providers, need to allow more room for a genuine political debate and political process so that citizens’ expectations are translated into coherent developmental policy proposals.

Recognising the eminently political nature of development is, of course, easier said than done! In many countries, political parties and parliaments are seen the “weakest links” of democracy. Helping them to assume a greater role may not be free of risks. Yet, bypassing them is a risk by far more dangerous as it may lay the ground for both populist shortcuts or systems in which political

actors become alienated from key national issues and consequently, from their natural constituencies.

Ideally, citizens chose their governments and hold them to account. But how responsive can the government of a Sub-Saharan country be to the popular outcry caused by rising food prices? In industrialised countries, ironically, the problem these days seems to be not that of filling stomachs, but gasoline tanks. And yet, there too, governments don't have an easy job in responding to public pressure. Add these problems to climate change, to HIV-AIDS, terrorism and the "war on terror" - and wise democratic leadership soon appears to be the squaring of a circle.

Our planet may be on the way to become a global village, but our democratic systems still function essentially within national borders. Democracy beyond borders remains essentially an ideal. Global governance is emerging in the laborious building of international law, in the development of regional entities such as the European or African Union, in the peace-building and developmental engagement of the United Nations and international financial institutions etc.

Multilateral and regional organisations are all seen as imperfect, lacking either efficiency, or inclusiveness, or democracy in their procedures and practices. Imperfect as they may be, they remain the most attractive way to build better and legitimate global governance.

Regional organisations of the global South seem particularly well placed to lead the way towards a more holistic and integrated approach to the building of democracy. They operate in dynamic environments where democracy and development clearly add sense to each other and make engagement on both fronts an indivisible whole.

International IDEA is proud to be the only inter-governmental organisation with a specific mandate to support sustainable democracy. But, more importantly, our approach is based on the understanding that democracy-

needs to grow from within, that there are no blueprints and that no external actor can replace those who pursue democracy as their own vital necessity and who will ultimately be its beneficiaries – the citizens of the country concerned. We help in sharing experiences and we provide tools, but these tools are always to be used by national stakeholders. One such new tool is just about to come out of our assembly line: “Assessing the Quality of Democracy- A practical Guide”. It is a tool based on IDEA’s already well known democracy self-assessment methodology and it takes into account the experience acquired in than more than 20 citizen-driven democracy assessment processes, from Mongolia to the Netherlands. An overview of the tool is made available to participants.

Excellencies and dear guests,

We will be privileged, today and tomorrow, to share the reflections of eminent policy-makers, scholars and opinion leaders, on the democracy/development nexus and the impact of globalisation. I am confident that their presentations and their interaction with us will be a source of invaluable inspiration for our own work and the way in which we translate our own commitments into practice.

Thanks again for your participation and for your kind attention.